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SUBJECT: CUBA AND VENEZUELA GARNER HEADLINES FOR PROVIDING
FREE EYE SURGERY TO SURINAMERS

REF: PARAMARIBO 414

1. (SBU) Summary. The Governments of Cuba (GOS) and Venezuela (GOV) are jointly funding a new medical assistance program to Suriname that provides eye treatment and surgery to impoverished Surinamers. The new Minister of Health Celsius Waterberg publicly praised the project, which has provided Cuba and Venezuela glowing headlines in recent weeks. Minister Waterberg received a medical degree from the Medical University of Havana, Cuba in 1989 and is married to a Cuban national. There are currently a small number of Cuban medical specialists in Suriname, who are welcomed in the country. This stands in contrast to a group of Cuban doctors who left the country five years ago under a cloud of controversy. End Summary.

2. (SBU) For the project, dubbed Milagros, two Cuban eye specialists, Dr. Julian Delgado Perez and Dr. Raquel Rodriguez, are treating people daily at Suriname's military hospital for eye ailments such as cataracts. The treatment is free of charge. During the project's first week, the Cuban doctors were reportedly treating 100 patients a day. Because of long lines and waits, patients were lining up in the wee hours of the morning to secure a spot near the front of the queue. The treatment is taking place at the military hospital where space is more readily available than at civilian hospitals. A senior physician at the military hospital told the Embassy that hospital doctors are happy to host the Cuban doctors and are impressed with the program. The military hospital had also hosted a group of Cuban doctors in the late 1990's. The treatment program is designed to last roughly one year, during which the doctors will move around the country. The project is being implemented in coordination with the Venezuelan Embassy. Cuba does not have a diplomatic presence in Suriname.

3. (U) Patients with serious eye conditions requiring surgery that is unavailable or unaffordable in Suriname are eligible to receive the procedure in Cuba at no charge. The Cuban doctors in Suriname first screen the patients before recommending that they be sent onward to Cuba. The GOV is paying for travel and lodging while the GOC absorbs treatment costs. Out of the roughly 400 Surinamers expected to receive free eye surgery in Cuba during the course of the program, the first group of 22 returned on October 27.

4. (U) On October 28 the "Times of Suriname", a local newspaper with the third largest national circulation, featured the 22 just-retained patients in a prominent front page story, complete with a photo of a smiling Cuban doctor assisting an elderly Surinamer. The paper quoted one returnee as saying, "It (the surgery) was a gift from heaven." Another returnee said that before the surgery, his eyes were so bad he couldn't work, but now he can once again earn an income and support his family.

5. (U) The newspaper De Ware Tijd, which has the largest circulation in Suriname, reported that the Cuban eye care project first began in Venezuela, where people declared blind returned from treatment cured. The report states that because the project was successful in treating 50,000 people, it was expanded to 11 Caribbean countries in June 2005. The report also states that 1,500 Guyanese have already been treated. The article ends with Minister Waterberg praising the success of the project because of its tremendous economic value for Suriname. Upon taking up his position in September, Waterberg expressed strong interest in sending Surinamers to Cuba for medical care.

6. (SBU) Since 1999 the Government of Suriname (GOS) and the GOC have had a bilateral cooperative agreement allowing Cuban doctors to work in Suriname and for Surinamese medical students to receive specialist training in Cuba. While the Ministry of Health refused to provide the Embassy with an official number of Cuban doctors working in Suriname calling it privileged information, other sources say that there are approximately four to five Cuban specialists in Suriname, including a radiologist and urologist. They work primarily at the Academic Hospital, Suriname's largest public health

care facility, which makes requests for Cuban specialists through the GOS.

17. (U) The specialists have received scant attention over the last few years, mainly because they work in specialties where Suriname has a shortage of doctors. This is in contrast with the controversy that surrounded nine Cuban general practitioners who arrived in Suriname in April 2000 at the invitation of then President Jules Wijdenbosch. Wijdenbosch brought in doctors to work in Suriname's interior without consulting with the Medical Mission, the medical organization responsible for health care in the interior. Because of this poor coordination and insurmountable language and cultural barriers, the doctors did very little work while in Suriname. Politically, Suriname's Medical Association put pressure on the government to move slowly in placing the Cubans because primary care physicians did not want to compete with cost-free care. In October 2000 the Cubans' mission came to a gruesome end when the team left after their leader hanged himself.

18. (U) Sending Surinamese patients to Cuba for surgery is a new development in GOC-GOS relations, but fits in with a new health care trend in Suriname. According to a Ministry of Health official, in the past, Suriname patients typically went to the Netherlands for treatment unavailable in Suriname. This now occurs less frequently because of the high costs associated with receiving treatment in the Netherlands. As an alternative, the government is seeking regional, less costly partners to treat Surinamers. For example, the government is now sending Surinamers with severe cardiac problems to Colombia for surgery.

COMMENT

19. (SBU) Venezuela and Cuba appeared to have pulled off a public relations success with their eye treatment assistance program, and assuming more patients return with expressions of profound gratitude the story will likely continue to play well. The program is the first evidence that Minister Waterberg is serious about expanding medical ties with Cuba, and it is to be expected that the assistance package will grow to include treatment of other ailments, likely with continued Venezuelan financial assistance. High profile newspaper reports on the project appear to be due in part to the hard work of the Venezuelan Embassy's public affairs officer, who has been busy since her arrival in May. (See reftel).

BARNES

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